

Wooden Piaget

Below are three diagrams, representing Jean Piaget's periodisation of childhood into four stages. These examples are taken from what seem to be hundreds of different versions available on the Internet (for more, [click here](#)).

The stages are clearly treated as, in Andy Blunden's words, "a nature-given process of maturation". The discrete way that Piaget names them ("Sensorimotor", "Preoperational", "Concrete Operational", and "Formal Operational"), is indicative of this.

Vygotsky, in contrast, marks the stages by describing the crises of transition from one to the next, and all of these are social crises. Vygotsky sees the typical features of the stages as

cumulative (i.e. quantitative), while it is in the critical jumps between stages that qualitative change is achieved, according to Vygotsky.

Vygotsky's periodisation is correctly called "stages of development", but Piaget does not recognise the social action of child and society. For Piaget, the stages arrive "Natural History" style, and child and society accept the changes, passively. Vygotsky is describing the active development of subjectivity and hence, development of freedom. Piaget misses this. Piaget is wooden, plodding, pedantic.

In defence of his reputation against the critique of Vygotsky (see attached), Piaget is evasive.

Piaget's method is categorical. When confronted with a difficulty, he invents another category. In this way, he becomes more and more dense and elaborate, and appears more and more clever to those, and they are millions, who would rather not have a critical method, because a critical method makes demands that people do not always want to meet. What is really dull can take on an aura or a mystique, and this is what has happened with Piaget.

The crude difference between Piaget and Vygotsky is that Piaget is lazier than Vygotsky. Hence it is only in Piaget's last paragraph that he gets to the crux of Vygotsky's message, where he (Piaget) says:

"I have not discussed in this commentary the question of socialization as a condition of intellectual development,

although Vygotsky raises it several times.”

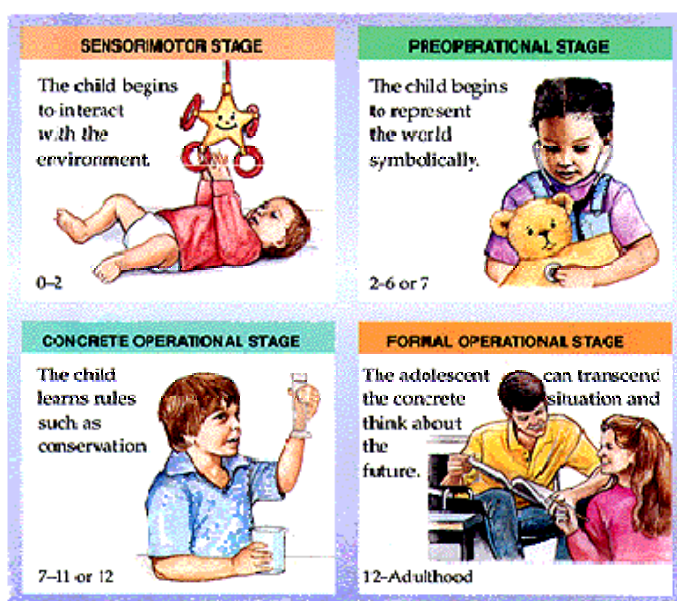
Having at last acknowledged this, Piaget hastens at once to contradict Vygotsky with a bald assertion:

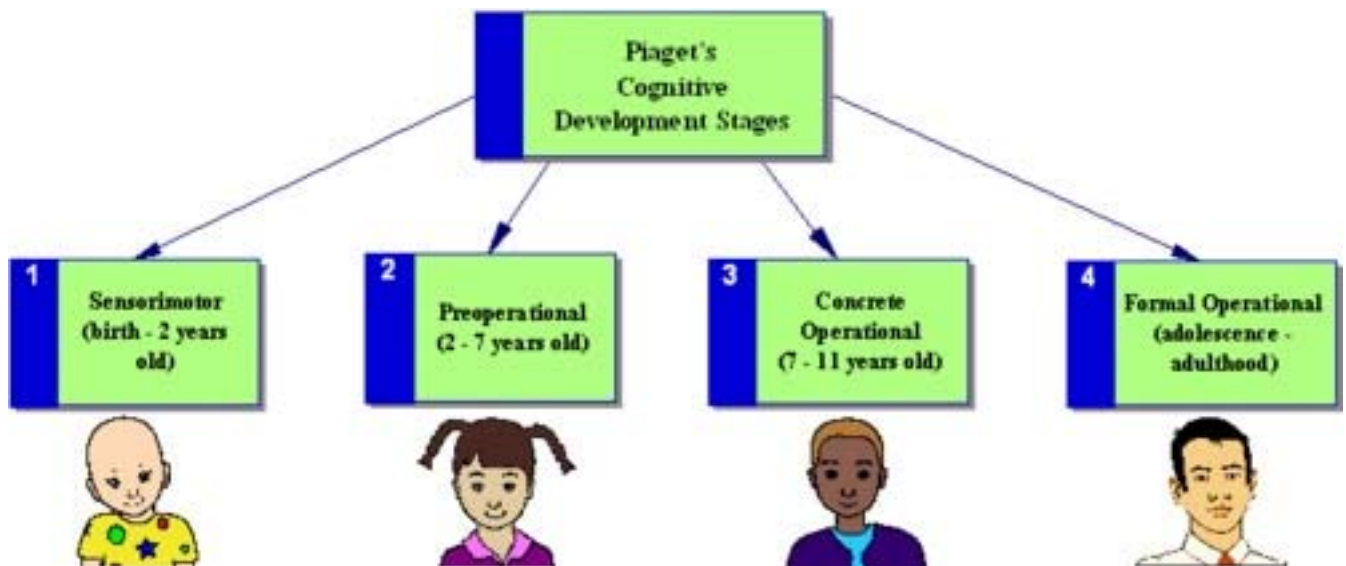
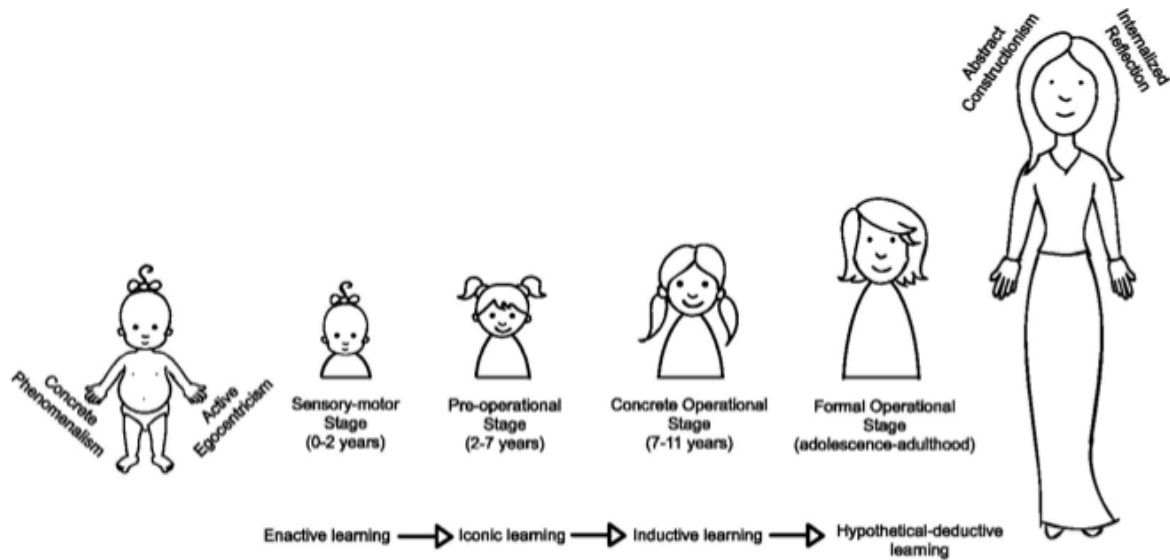
“Actions, whether individual or interpersonal, are in essence co-ordinated and organized by the operational structures which are spontaneously constructed in the course of mental development.”

Spontaneously constructed?

What is spontaneous, is not constructed. What is constructed, is not spontaneous. These two terms are not compatible. This phrase, “spontaneously constructed”, demonstrates in a nutshell what Piaget’s problem is. It is that he cannot bear to contemplate the free-willing subject. Whereas for Vygotsky, learning to be free, by being free, is exactly what growing up and education are all about.

Piagetian diagrams:





- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [Comments on Vygotsky's critical remarks, Piaget, 1962](#).
- To download any of the CU courses in PDF files [please click here](#).